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ABSTRACT

The nature of the developmental shift from adolescence to adulthood has been of ongoing interest to researchers studying the development of socio-moral cognition from within the "cognitive-developmental" paradigm. This paper identifies three dimensions along which developmental changes in socio-moral cognition occur during late adolescence: normative moral cognition, moral metacognition, and epistemic moral cognition. Normative moral cognition involves making first-order judgments about what is right, good, or obligatory, and giving reasons for such judgments. Moral metacognition refers to the processes an individual invokes to think about and reflect on first-order processes. Epistemic moral cognition is primarily concerned with the nature and validity of moral language and moral knowledge. This model suggests that previous attempts to understand socio-moral development during the present era have been fundamentally flawed. Ultimately, the model may lead to both a more accurate description and a more useful explanation of the development of socio-moral cognition during late adolescence. (Author/RH)

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The Development of Socio-Moral Cognition in Late Adolescence: A Three-Dimensional Model

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Abstract

The nature of the developmental shift from adolescence to adulthood has been of ongoing interest to researchers studying the development of socio-moral cognition from within the "cognitive-developmental" paradigm. This paper identifies three dimensions along which developmental changes in socio-moral cognition occur during late adolescence: normative moral cognition, moral metacognition, and epistemic moral cognition. This model suggests that previous attempts to understand socio-moral development during this era have been fundamentally flawed. Ultimately, this model may lead to both a more accurate description and and a more useful explanation of the development of socio-moral cognition during late adolescence.

The Development of Socio-Moral Cognition in Late Adolescence: A Three-Dimensional Model

The nature of the developmental changes that occur in socio-moral cognition in the domain of justice (i.e., thinking and reasoning about moral conflicts involving issues of justice and fairness) during late adolescence has been of ongoing interest to a number of researchers studying moral development from the standpoint of the Piagetian "cognitive-developmental" paradigm (see Gilligan, 1981; Gilligan & Kohlberg, 1978; Gilligan & Murphy, 1979; Kohlberg, 1973, 1984; Kohlberg & Gilligan, 1971; Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969; Murphy & Gilligan, 1980; Turiel, 1974, 1977). There are, however, significant disagreements with respect to both the description and explanation of these developmental changes in late adolescence. In this paper I will attempt to address some of these disagreements, by proposing a preliminary model that I will argue provides a more accurate and useful way to understand this important era in the development of socio-moral cognition.

Kohlberg and Kramer (1969) first identified late adolescence and the college years as a problematic and complex era in the life cycle with respect to moral development in the justice domain. This was due to the apparent "retrogression" from a mixture of "conventional and principled" morality to a form of "egoistic and hedonistic relativism" that occurred for some of Kohlberg's longitudinal subjects during their first two years in college. Kohlberg's (1973, 1984, chapter 6) attempts to account for this phenomenon

have included a radical revision of both his theoretical assumptions and empirical methods. Ultimately he has suggested that such a period of subjectivism and moral relativism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the transition from stage four conventional morality to stage five post-conventional or "principled" morality in the justice domain.[1] Nevertheless, given the continuing changes in Kohlberg's own thinking about this subject, it is clear that both the description and the explanation of socio-moral development during late adolescence remains open to significant question and debate.

This debate has been joined in recent years by Gilligan and Murphy (1979; see also Murphy & Gilligan, 1980), who adopt a view that is exactly opposite that of Kohlberg and Turiel. Murphy and Gilligan (1980) argue that in the transition from adolescence to adulthood, post-conventional morality in the justice domain gives way to the abandonment of abstract principles of justice, in favor of a much more contextual and relativistic view of moral conflict and choice. They argue, furthermore, that such apparent relativistic "regression," when it is viewed from the standpoint of Kohlberg's system, is actually a developmental progression, when it is viewed against a standard of commitment in relativism, following the work of Perry

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1. It is important to note that this is Kohlberg's (1984, chapter 6) most recent view, and that it represents an attenuation of his earlier view. His earlier view (Kohlberg, 1973) argued, following the work of Turiel (1974, 1977), that relativism and subjectivism was an actual transitional "stage" ("Stage 4 1/2") located between conventional and post-conventional justice reasoning. It was considered to be transitional because it seemed to mark a disequilibrated questioning of, and an awareness of the contradictions inherent in, the previous stage structure, in the absence of a new structure with which to resolve those contradictions.

(1970, 1981). They also suggest that this progression from abstract principles to contextual relativism is related to actual real-life experiences of moral conflict and choice that lead to the restructuring of moral judgment in a more relativistic and dialectical form.

Thus, to simplify this debate to make my point, on the one hand Kohlberg and Turiel argue that relativism leads to post-conventional principled morality, while on the other, Gilligan and Murphy argue that post-conventional principled morality leads to relativism. Both of these views attempt to describe and explain the developmental changes in socio-moral cognition in the justice domain that occur for at least some persons (i.e., persons who are bright, highly educated, and verbally sophisticated) in the shift from adolescence to adulthood. How can this debate, and these two opposing views, be resolved?

My aim in this paper is to propose a model that may account for the developmental changes in socio-moral cognition that Kohlberg, Turiel, and Gilligan and Murphy have all observed. As such, I will identify three separate dimensions along which developmental changes in socio-moral cognition seem to occur during late adolescence: normative moral cognition, moral metacognition, and epistemic moral cognition. These dimensions are based, in part, on Kitchener's (1983) three-level model of cognitive processing, which makes a distinction between cognition, metacognition, and epistemic cognition. Let me briefly present the three dimensions conceptually, and then illustrate each with excerpts from an interview with an 18 year-old Harvard college freshman who participated in a study investigating short-term developmental change in socio-moral reasoning during

late-adolescence (see Tappan, 1984).

For Kitchener (1983), cognition involves the first level processes, strategies, and operations an individual uses when engaged in such cognitive tasks as computing, memorizing, reading, perceiving, acquiring language, etc. "These are the premonitored cognitive processes," says Kitchener, "on which knowledge of the world is built" (p. 225).

Normative moral cognition, then, refers to the normative moral judgments an individual makes, and the operations he or she uses, when asked to solve a moral conflict or respond to a moral dilemma. Normative moral thinking involves making first-order judgments about what is right, good, or obligatory, and giving, or being ready to give, reasons for these judgments (Frankena, 1973, p. 4). In the domain of justice, Kohlberg (1984) has charted and described development along this dimension by means of a six-stage sequence that captures changes in the structure of an individual's normative moral cognition in response to hypothetical justice dilemmas--dilemmas that place two moral claims in conflict (e.g., life vs. property).

Peter, a bright and articulate 18 year-old, provides an example of normative moral cognition in his response to the following questions from Kohlberg's hypothetical Dilemma IV (the euthanasia dilemma), during an interview at the end of his first year in college:

> WHAT IS THE CONFLICT IN THIS DILEMMA?
> It is a conflict involving the woman's liberty. Presumably she is in possession of her mental faculties. Presuming all the facts are in, and she asks to be killed, it is her right to die. If she didn't have the right to make that choice, you have undermined so much that is important in her life, the liberty idea, the sanctity of life thing that I was talking about before. One thing that I don't think I mentioned before about

> this that intrigues me is that although the woman has the right to die, does she have the right to ask the doctor to kill her? She is asking the doctor to do something that is against the law and against the Hippocratic oath, and maybe against his own preferences if he were in the situation. She has the right to die, it seems, but I don't know if she has the right to ask someone else and expect that it be carried out....That is the conflict though, it is her liberty versus the doctor's liberty—his right to refuse and his personal feelings on the subject. (8.24)

This example of normative moral cognition would be guess scored structurally as a mixture of stage 4/5 and stage 5 post-conventional justice reasoning using Kohlberg's Standard Issue scoring system (Colby & Kohlberg, in press).

Kitchener (1983) defines metacognition as the second level processes that are invoked to monitor the first level cognitive strategies used to solve cognitive tasks:

> Metacognitive processes include knowledge about cognitive tasks (e.g., how to memorize a list of words), about particular strategies that may be invoked to solve the task (e.g., saying the word out loud), of when and how the strategy should be applied (e.g., when one is required to remember the state capitals in school), and about the success or failure of any of these processes. (p. 225)

Kitchener (1983) points to the work of Flavell (1979, 1981) and others to suggest that the concept of metacognition has had a major influence on the study of cognitive development in the last decade (p. 222).

Moral metacognition, then, refers to the processes an individual invokes to think about and reflect on her or his first-order normative moral cognition and decision-making processes. This is not a dimension along which developmental change has thus far been systematically charted, but, as Flavell (1981) argues, metacognitive monitoring of "social-cognitive enterprizes" (such as socio-moral cognition) represents a new and potentially

fruitful area for developmental study (p. 272).

Peter provides an example of moral metacognition in his response to the following question

> DO YOU THINK YOU'VE CHANGED IN THE WAY YOU RESPOND TO THIS DILEMMA (Dilemma IV) OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR?
>
> I don't think the doctor has a duty to do the mercy killing. He may have in the past, for me, but now, this is a result of seeing the problem from his angle as well as from the lady's angle, and being able to see from both angles that it is not only the lady's liberty at stake but also the doctor's liberty at stake too. (8.33)
>
> DO YOU HAVE A SENSE OF WHY THAT'S CHANGED FOR YOU? WHY DO YOU LOOK AT IT FROM HIS ANGLE TOO?
>
> I don't know. I am just concentrating more. Maybe this year...all the relationships with people and the closeness of the quarters sometimes tends to create conflict, and when it does I have found that one of the best ways to get around conflicts is to look at the situation--not from all sides, being me, saying "I can look at this problem this way or that way"--but to look at the problem from my way and all the different ways I can think of it, and then try to honestly look at it from another person's point of view. It is a thought experiment for me, and it is something I do consciously. "What do I think my roommates are thinking about this?" That really mellows you out. It opens you up to a lot of self-criticism because you can see that these people are thinking I'm a real schmuck! If you really get into it and think about it you will see that when you are sure you are right, if you think about it (and it's kind of hard to do at first) from another's position you will be less sure of yourself, because they are valid too. And it will make you easier to deal with. Ideally everybody should do that--I think a lot of people do. (8.34)
>
> BUT THERE IS A DIFFERENCE IN LOOKING AT PROBLEMS FOR YOURSELF AND FROM OTHER PEOPLE'S POINTS OF VIEW?
>
> It is the difference in looking at problem X from my point of view, but from different conceptions of the problem, as opposed to looking at problem X from different <u>people's</u> perspectives. (8.35)

I would argue that Peter's discussion of, and reflection on, his own moral decision-making processes is an example of socio-moral cognition at the metacognitive level--a dimension along which a change, and perhaps even a developmental change, has apparently taken place for Peter over the course of

the year, according to his own report.

Finally, Kitchener (1983) defines epistemic cognition as follows:

> The third level, epistemic cognition, is characterized as the processes an individual invokes to monitor the epistemic nature of problems and the truth value of alternative solutions. It includes the individual's knowledge about the limits of knowing (e.g., some things can be known and others cannot), the certainty of knowing (e.g., some things can only be known probabilistically), and the criteria for knowing (e.g., one knows the answer to a question if it can be conclusively verified scientifically.) It also includes the strategies used to identify and choose between the form of solution required for different problem types. (pp. 225-226)

Epistemic moral cognition, then, represents the "metaethical" application of this process with respect to moral problems or conflicts and their solutions. As such, epistemic moral cognition concerns itself primarily with the nature and validity of moral language and moral knowledge:

> It asks and tries to answer logical, epistemological, or semantical questions like the following: What is the meaning or use of the expressions "(morally) right" or "good"? How can ethical and value judgments be established or justified? Can they be justified at all? What is the nature of morality? What is the distinction between the moral and the nonmoral? (Frankena, 1973, p. 5)

Although this dimension of socio-moral cognition has received slightly more attention than the metacognitive dimension (see Boyd, 1980; Fishkin, 1984; Kohlberg, 1984, chapter 6; Murphy & Gilligan, 1980), it remains the case that developmental change along this dimension has also not been systematically charted, as yet.

Peter provides an example of epistemic moral cognition in his response to the following question:

> DO YOU THINK YOU'VE CHANGED IN THE WAY YOU RESPOND TO THIS DILEMMA (Dilemma III) OVER THE COURSE OF THE YEAR?

> Perhaps a little bit. I think I am now less sure of things than before. I am more sure--this is perhaps a paradox--I am more sure of myself because I am less sure of things: meaning that it is a very big burden to carry around to know every goddamn thing in the world and be correct all the time. So when you examine questions like this you realize that you are not correct all the time, and this great burden is lifted from your shoulders. When you find part of the answer--that there is a lot of uncertainty out there--that is a good feeling. I have not just thrown up my hands and said that it is all relative and that there are no answers, but I have looked at it and said that it is complicated, but there are answers, I just haven't found them yet. The paradox is that I am more sure of my ability now to think through situations and more sure of my correctness morally by being unsure of all the answers and all the rules and all the flat-out moral statements. I feel better about that now, morally. (8.16)

Peter's ability to engage in socio-moral cognition at the epistemic level is very clear here. It represents, I would argue, a radically different level of discourse than that of the other two dimensions.

This model assumes that developmental change in socio-moral cognition occurs along all three dimensions during late adolescence. It suggests, therefore, that previous attempts to understand the development of socio-moral cognition in the justice domain from adolescence to adulthood have been fundamentally flawed: In failing to make the distinction between the three dimensions described above, Kohlberg and Turiel, on the one hand, and Gilligan and Murphy, on the other, have all confused and confounded change along these dimensions. Specifically, from the standpoint of this model these researchers have argued that developmental change in the structure of normative moral cognition in late adolescence is somehow dependent on change in epistemic moral cognition: Kohlberg and Turiel claim that change along the epistemic dimension leads to change along the normative dimension (i.e., relativism leads to post-conventional principled morality),

while Gilligan and Murphy equate change along the epistemic dimension with change along the normative dimension (i.e., contextual relativism represents a developmental advance over post-conventional principled morality). Preliminary interview data (Tappan, 1984), however, suggests that while there are indeed changes along all three dimensions during the first year in college, the changes appear to be fundamentally independent. Thus change along one dimension is not dependent on change along the other dimension(s) (although the dimensions themselves, while distinct, do appear to be related and interdependent in a fundamental sense).

In conclusion, a conceptualization of these three dimensions--normative moral cognition, moral metacognition, and epistemic moral cognition--as the dimensions along which developmental changes in socio-moral cognition in the justice domain occur during late adolescence serves to highlight important and useful developmental distinctions. Above all it suggests that any examination of developmental change along these dimensions must be very careful to acknowledge the distinctions between them, before exploring the potential interrelationships among them. Such a preliminary model also suggests a number of crucial tasks that lie ahead, including the development of a reliable and valid methodology to chart change along the currently uncharted dimensions (the metacognitive and the epistemic), and the consideration of whether or not these dimensions of socio-moral cognition in the justice domain also apply to socio-moral cognition in the domain of care and response (see Gilligan, 1982). Ultimately, perhaps such a model will lead to both a more accurate description and a more useful explanation of socio-moral development during late adolescence.

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